Remember the feeling? Being forced to listen to another ethics trainer, clicking through another organizationally mandated online ethics training, or reading another memo from Human Resources railing against everyone for one particular employee’s bad behavior. Ever get the sense that these well-meaning talks are really just telling you what you have known since kindergarten? Don’t take others’ belongings. Be kind. Treat others fairly. Clean up after yourself. This book is not an attack on ethics training or how ethics tends to be led in the workplace, but it is an attempt to be honest about it. We value ethics as a good all- unto- itself and we want members of our organizations to make ethical decisions. We know good organizational ethics is good for the bottom line (or, perhaps more accurately, public condemnation of unethical organizational behavior is bad for the bottom line); we like to be identified with groups and organizations with positive reputations. We certainly don’t like to be on the receiving end of others’ bad behavior. Values like these motivate us to want to encourage ethical behavior and decisions in our workplace.

To those ends, we train ethics. When we treat ethics as trainable we operate from a pattern we have experienced throughout our lives. As children, we were taught (read, trained) in ethics. Is it any wonder why we look to the patterns and strategies displayed by parents, guardians, coaches, and teachers, who taught us morals from the beginning, as the scripts for how to encourage ethical behaviors from others in the workplace? That script reads like this: If you want better behavior and decision making, you need to teach morals. Of course, I teach my own children the need to share and take turns (among many other fundamentals). When I teach these ideas, I am basically following the notion that if my kids know better, they’ll do better. I train ethics in my home. However, what if that script of “knowing better” to “do better” is right for children but not
necessarily a good fit for encouraging ethical behavior from working adults? How might rethinking the underlying assumptions of ethics training and ethics leadership reframe how we go about encouraging ethical workplaces?

When we attempt to teach ethics to working adults we are assuming that the core issue with misbehavior is a lack of ethical knowledge, but is the issue really that working adults do not know better and that is why they are not doing better? Are unethical organizational members really just ethically unintelligent or uninformed? The truth is many of our strategies and attempts designed to encourage organizational ethics seem to make that assumption. This book challenges that assumption and, in turn, formulates a complementary (and at times different) set of strategies for leading organizational ethics to what is common in the modern workplace with its codes of conduct and standardized ethics trainings.

The first section of this book attempts to show how applying the scripts of individual moral instruction used by the authority figures of our youth is not the only available, or even the most appropriate, means to leading ethical behavior in the workplace. But I wish to emphasize that many extremely intelligent, skillful, and right-motived individuals train ethics. The content of this book joins with their ultimate desire to encourage moral excellence in the workplace. Yet, in this book, I integrate leading-edge scientific findings into a new perspective on leading organizational ethics, which invites us to rethink our first assumptions about how encouraging ethical behavior works.

There are many widely held assumptions about organizational ethics, ethical behavior, and ethical decision making that I hope to unpack throughout the course of the following pages and chapters. But before I venture too far, I need to give you a sense of why I approach the issue of leading organizational ethics differently: I am an organizational communication scholar. As such, I want to begin the process of describing a new way of thinking about leading organizational ethics by drawing your attention to a powerful insight about organizations and organizational communication. This insight hints at the profoundly social aspect of leading organizational ethics that cannot be merely reduced to improving individuals’ ethical reasoning. The traditional approach to leading organizational ethics tends to view ethical thinkers as individuals with brains that work to reason ethically with greater or lesser success. Here, the idea is that the whole can merely be reduced to the sum of its parts. The idea goes that ethics is an issue of reasoning and smart people do it better. From this perspective, if you want a more ethical organization, you need to get a bunch of intelligent thinkers together to work toward a common goal. The trouble is some very smart people have created some truly evil organizations, and even nation states. I do not mean to suggest that intelligent people are necessarily evil. I do suggest that leading ethical organizations has less to do with how individuals think and more to do with how groups of individuals talk with one another. That point resonates with a different view of organizational ethics that is informed by organizational
communication. Consider the following insight, given to us by organizational communication research:

Group talk is group thought—five little words with enormous implications for leaders. Sure, most sane individuals can think without talking to themselves (so I hear). However, groups of individuals cannot “think” as a group without talk. Talk makes individuals’ private thoughts available for public discussion and collective adjustments. Think of it this way: If smart organizations were merely the collection of smart individuals then the best organizations could be created by collecting high-powered, high-intellect brains. Those brains could then be placed in jars and arranged around an executive meeting table. Voila! A brilliant organization. (Not so much). Of course, the brains at that table could never rise to the level of organization until they are able to communicate with one another in order to decide on collective goals and decide how to coordinate the best courses of action to achieve those goals.

Organizational communication scholars have written extensively about the idea that communication not only occurs within organizations, but also, in a real sense, organizations are communicational (Bisel, 2010; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In other words, organizations cannot exist in the absence of communication. This idea is central because it helps us understand organizations for what they are, namely, different than individuals. Sure, an individual could exist without communicating—although that existence does not sound fun, safe, or sustainable for the long term. Organizations, on the other hand, cannot exist without communication because that is what they are. In fact, the communicational nature of organizations led the famed Karl Weick (1969) to encourage us to speak more often with the verb organizing than the noun organization to help us think more carefully about how intimately organizing is tied up with ongoing communication. In short, when organizations are constituted by high-quality communication, the organization by fact thrives. When organizations are constituted by low-quality, unproductive, misguided communication, the organization by fact falters.

The organizational catastrophes experienced by the United States’ National Aeronautics Space Administration (NASA)—such as the Challenger and Columbia disasters—are great examples of how extremely learned and intelligent brains can combine together to make poor decisions because of poor-quality communication patterns. Retrospective analyses of these disasters confirm that communication troubles among these rocket scientists were largely to blame for the disasters. The issue was not a deficiency of individuals’ thoughts—individuals within the Administration warned others about the troubles that would eventually result in catastrophe. The issue was a deficiency of group-level thought, in that individuals’ warnings were not taken seriously enough in group-level talk to shape courses of action and avert catastrophe. In short, individuals can think without saying a word, but groups cannot think collectively without communication. What is more, the quality of group talk (be it of poor or rich
quality) is the quality of group thought and the quality of the organization being produced.

On January 28, 1986, Challenger fell out of the sky only 73 seconds after launch, killing all seven crew members and horrifying a nation. Organizational communication scholars who studied NASA in the aftermath of the disaster were able to pinpoint key problems with how groups within the Agency talked, and therefore, thought. Prior to the disaster, mid-level managers’ way of talking shifted from reinforcing the idea that a launch “should be canceled if there is any doubt of its safety” to talking with subordinates and lower-level engineers in ways that reinforced the idea a scheduled launch would “proceed unless there is conclusive evidence that it is unsafe to do so” (Hirokawa, Gouran, & Martz, 1988, p. 423). The Agency’s history seemed to repeat itself on February 1, 2003, when the space shuttle Columbia broke apart during launch. The Agency’s own internal analysis of the crisis blames, in part, communication problems. The self-study describes that prior to the disaster, upward dissenting emails from concerned engineers were ignored by management or resulted in “face-to-face heated arguments with no follow-up action” (National Aeronautics Space Agency, 2011, p. 9). Elsewhere, the self-study reveals that organizational members began to play by unwritten communication rules, such as, “Don’t email managers in high positions” (p. 9). Meanwhile, management worked according to a communication norm in which they passed information to lower ranks but believed passing information upwardly to top-level decision makers was not their job description. One organizational member reported being told by a manager, “I integrate information down, not upward” (p. 9). Those kinds of communication patterns gave rise to a quality of organizing that was bound to result in catastrophe. Taken together, the story of these catastrophes illustrates how organizing arises from a web of relationships among thinking, communicating, deciding, and organizing. Many more insights from organizational communication are described throughout the book and leveraged to offer a new perspective of leading organizational ethics. However, for now, consider another basic truth of communication:

No one has direct access to anyone else’s cognition. There always remains some gap between our individual cognition and what we are able to (or are willing to) share with others about our thoughts through our messaging. I think of this separation as a profoundly auspicious set of circumstances. I am glad that there is a distance between what I am thinking and what I can tell others I am thinking. Go ahead; think about it. Isn’t it nice that others do not necessarily know what you are thinking? Some may assume that reducing the discrepancy between private thoughts and public communication is the ideal goal of skillful communicators. In some circumstances, like explaining to a lover your feelings, this might be the case. However, communication is not merely judged by whether our messaging reproduces our private thoughts accurately and faithfully.
In fact, communicating can call into being a different—sometimes advantageous and sometimes disadvantageous—set of social circumstances contrary to or in addition to our private thoughts. Imagine your boss asks you to complete a task that you *think* is doomed to fail or could cause you and your department embarrassment. That private cognition is probably not what a skillful communicator would share with the boss. Could you imagine saying the following to your boss: “Stupid idea. This is going to cause us huge embarrassment. Think about what you are asking of your people before you open your big, fat mouth again.” We know that, even if those are accurate representations of our private thoughts, such words would trigger a series of task and relationship consequences that would make life harder. Thus, we shape those private thoughts into public communication, which we hope will elicit far better task and relationship outcomes. Instead, the most communicatively and politically skillful among us would probably use politeness strategies, like asking questions, feigning confusion, using humor, and many others, in order to maintain a positive impression with the boss while also finding a way to reshape the task directive. In this way, communication is not merely a reflection of private thoughts. Communication is its own force that presents private thoughts in specific ways, to specific audiences, and creates new social situations that could not be present without communication. In short, communication matters.

What does all that have to do with organizational ethics? These ideas begin to hint at the possibility that organizational ethics is not only a matter of individuals’ moral cognition. Perhaps communication also shares an important role in creating social situations for how ethics plays out in the workplace. The pages of this book explain how organizational communication mediates the private ethical concerns and aspirations of individuals and how those private ethical thoughts scale up (or not) to ethical organizing. For now, however, I review the track record of organizational ethics and training programs designed to improve individuals’ moral cognitions. The point here is to review how the traditional approach to encouraging ethical behavior in the workplace is faring. In other words, how effective is the organizational programming that originates in a *know better to do better* assumption?

**Organizational and Business Ethics Training: The Tale of the Tape**

Perhaps now, more than ever, there is a growing awareness that unethical organizational actors can threaten individual, corporate, national, and even global stability. The institutionalized, unethical actions of Wall Street brought the world near the brink of economic collapse in 2008. This context motivates well-intentioned managers and executives to take action. Because training seems like the remedy to what ails the organization, it makes sense that many turn to corporate trainers to educate workers about ethics and morals in the workplace.
But how effective is organizational and business ethics training in curbing unethical behavior? On par, it is not. As frustrating as that answer might seem, it is the empirical answer. I assume that many who read these pages have participated in organizational or business ethics training at some point in time because the practice of training ethics is so ubiquitous. The common training and teaching strategy involves learning about principles of ethical decision making—perhaps via reading an article or listening to a lecture—and then reading case-study scenarios that present difficult ethical choices for the protagonist. Learners then are directed to discuss the key issues and render a convincing reason for their proposed ethical course of action. These scenarios tend to be dry, distant, abstract, unemotional, and contrived—none of which are characteristics of the ethical situations that actually face us in the workplace. These kinds of case-based ethics training strategies are commonplace and they give us the sense that we are doing something to educate workers about ethics and curb unethical behavior.

Yet, when put to the test of scientific scrutiny, these training approaches—although highly common—are not consistently beneficial in improving ethical behavior. Empirical work conducted on the effectiveness of ethics training reveals two takeaways: First, studies frequently find uneven or short-lived effects of ethics training on participants' moral awareness or moral reasoning. Second, many studies that find such equivocal results measure reasoning about ethics, not whether more morally excellent conduct actually ensues in the workplace. Let's start with the first point.

Research on organizational and business ethics training reveals inconsistent, unstable, and equivocal results. In a study of business ethics education implemented with 77 undergraduate students, a researcher conducted a standard business ethics training in which, “Students were exposed to real-life fictional case studies that asked them to apply the ethical principles they had learned to a particular business case scenario” (Ritter, 2006, p. 157). Sound familiar? The researcher then conducted a rigorous assessment of the training’s effectiveness in improving students’ moral awareness and reasoning. About half the students were given the ethics training and half were not. The stage was set to see if the business ethics training mattered. Ultimately, the data revealed the undergraduates who received the training and those who did not were not different in their moral awareness and reasoning. The ethics training did not seem to have measurable effects. Elsewhere, a researcher conducted a somewhat similar study with business students. This time students were tested right after training and again in four weeks. Their disapproval of unethical business scenarios waned measurably, leading the researcher to lament the transient effects of limited ethics training and call for “more extensive training provided through either a separate ethics course or through incorporation of ethics training into a number of courses in the business curriculum” (Richards, 1999, p. 332). The effects of the ethics training were not stable but declined within a single month after the training.
Perhaps, as Richards (1999) suggested, ethics training needs to be more thoroughly implemented over a longer period of time? In other words, perhaps the problem is one of limited exposure. The claim might go like this: A single training session is not enough to make trainees more ethically intelligent. They need more intense exposure to the ethics-medicine. Not likely. In yet another similar study, about 150 business college students who were just entering college, were compared with nearly 150 college students who were near completion of their degree. The question was, who reported valuing positive virtues more, the first-year business college students or the seniors? The senior college students were exposed to ethics education throughout the duration of their four-year college experience. An entire college degree worth of coursework, lectures, assignments, and discussions separated the entering first-year business students from their exiting senior counterparts. Surely, seniors were sufficiently exposed to the ethics-medicine to make them know ethics better, right? Disturbingly, seniors reported valuing generosity, idealism, compassion, critical and questioning attitude toward authority, friendliness, and honesty significantly less than their first-year student counterparts (Allen, Bacdayan, Kowalski, & Roy, 2005). Yikes. In this case, the medicine of ethics training in college business education is not just benign, it is actual harming ethics-based performance. Elsewhere, organizational ethicists have noted, “Although business ethics courses are now an accepted part of the . . . curriculum. . . . The few studies that have been done show inconclusive results” (Murphy & Boatright, 1994, p. 326); others reflect, “those studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of ethics education programs tend to report equivocal results, where the causal link between the ethics education program and the transfer of knowledge to the real world setting is ambiguous” (Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Buckley, 2005, p. 386). What is going on? Why does ethics seem to be difficult to teach in a meaningful way to college students?

Perhaps, these findings are merely an artifact of the moral or intellectual “immaturity” of college students? Again, that is just not a likely explanation for these findings. In another ethics training study, the participants were hundreds of post-doctoral research fellows. Participants were funded by the National Institute for Health because of their extraordinary research acumen. In other words, participants were some of the brightest, most-educated, minds society has to offer. At the conclusion of training, very few changes in the research fellows’ ethically appropriate behavioral judgments about research ethics were detected after exposure to the training. Thus, whether participants are college students or doctors the story of the effectiveness of ethics training remains unimpressive.

Furthermore, I find it quite remarkable how easy it is to find peer-reviewed published articles that confirm organizational ethics training has short-lived, minute, or no effect on participants. Why? Because as a social scientist I know how very difficult it is to get editors to publish non-significant findings—the kind of findings that these ethics training studies represent. Editors of
peer-reviewed journals are motivated to publish studies that “worked out” as planned, which means statistically significant effects of interventions were detected. In the social sciences, the conventional hypothesis-testing approach to knowledge creation requires that hypotheses state proposed differences or associations. In this research tradition, researchers do not guess there will be no effects. No effects means a study’s medicine failed to improve the patients. Thus, the study becomes much less newsworthy than those studies that demonstrate the metaphorical medicine helped. In the case of ethics training, the difference of interest is, of course, an improvement in moral decision making and behavior before and after ethics training. Yet, scientific reports that reveal the ethics training failed to generate differences and hypotheses are not uncommon in this subfield of inquiry. That leads me to believe that many, many ethics training studies have probably been conducted but were never published because of the difficulty of selling null findings to journal editors. These studies are likely in file drawers in universities and organizations and probably make professors and training professionals wonder if their own failed attempts at training ethics were unique, an aberration, or fluke, when, in fact, such findings are not uncommon in the least. Thankfully, some rigorous social scientists, such as those who conducted the studies described above, were honest with their findings and managed to get them published.

Taken together, these findings should give us pause. Why is ethics training a normalized, institutionalized approach in the modern workplace to encouraging ethical organizing when inconclusive benefits from these treatments are seen, even under the most controlled circumstances? My guess is that the underlying assumption that individuals merely need to know better to do better has achieved incontestable status. After all, according to the National Business Ethics Survey®, as many as 81% of organizations provide ethics training (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2013). Almost certainly, organizational members could reason, “Most every other reputable organization has ethics training, we should too.” The belief is so firmly fixed it is hard to question or even conceive of a possible alternative assumption and set of strategies for encouraging ethical organizing.

A second problem with many approaches to studying organizational ethics training programs involves the difficulty of measuring the important outcome (actual ethical behavior in the workplace). Many, if not most, ethics training studies seek to measure whether training interventions changed students’ and trainees’ ability to analyze ethically laden scenarios, not actual ethical behavior in the workplace. These studies tend to measure whether trained participants are more aware that ethics is involved in scenarios and whether their ability to leverage ethics principles to render an appropriate decision or course of action for the scenarios’ protagonist is improved. In other words, the measured outcome is largely academically elegant, not practically relevant.

The trouble is there remains a gap between whether one can read a hypothetical scenario and comment on that scenario in line with trainers’ desired
intentions and whether actual ethical behavior in the workplace is improved across one’s job and career experiences. Again, I do not mean to denigrate ethics training researchers because the topic itself is extremely complex and difficult to study. There are much, much easier topics to tackle as a scientist (although I think few are more important!). Imagine a more realistic measure of training effectiveness in which researchers tempted trainees covertly while recording them in the months or years following training. Obviously, that kind of research approach is itself unethical. The conventional, gold-standard approach of pre-test/post-test ethics training research is academically elegant in the sense that it obeys the logic of experimental testing of cause and effect. However, experiments often require researchers to disengage ethics from the emotionally laden and contextualized experiences that the real world involves. Identifying a protagonist’s potential course of action in a case-based story is a cognitive exercise. But, at the end of it, we are not the protagonist in these narratives and are, therefore, not personally, relationally, or emotionally invested in the implications of the protagonist’s course of action. Furthermore, we do not necessarily experience the humdrum of everyday workplace life as an ethics narrative. When a researcher places an ethics-based scenario story in front of us, we are especially attuned to reading that scenario as an ethics story because of the instrumentation. But life does not unfold for us in quite the same way.

Other troubles with studying organizational ethical behavior abound. For instance, individuals tend to think quite highly of the ethics of their own behavior, are reluctant to share instances of their own ethical failings (if they are even able to remember them), and tend to think of only major ethical lapses as worthy of investigation. This list is merely the beginning of the kinds of difficulties associated with conducting studies of organizational ethics training. But all is not lost. Two studies, in particular, stand out as exceptionally imaginative in their approaches to investigating organizational ethics training and hint at a fruitful way forward for the future.

**Denver City Ethics Initiative: Observing Police Officers’ Moral Dialogue**

Spoma Jovanovic and Roy Wood (2006) undertook a study of an ethics initiative created by the city of Denver’s municipal government. As with seemingly all such organizational initiatives, there were triggers: A consistent flow of embarrassing accusations pounded the credibility of city officials. The mayor and executive director of the Civil Service Commission were accused of nepotism; others accused city council members of accepting free football tickets while making decisions about a new football stadium proposal, as well as accepting free parking tickets from a commercial parking company which was licensed by the city. The mayor (under the political pressure of accusations) called for a rewrite of Denver City’s ethics code to reduce ambiguities. The call was no
doubt helpful for the mayor’s image management. A call for ethics programs like this raises concerns that such programs are mere window dressing or shields against public scrutiny—a point that can encourage cynicism, and perhaps rightly so. The initiative included a proviso that 14,000 ethics handbooks be distributed to the elected officials throughout the city. In sum, a few were caught, so everyone had to read the handbook and sit through some ethics training.

The researchers, Jovanovic and Wood (2006), then participated in a slow-moving and deliberate observation of the evolution of the ethics initiative over the following four years. They were actively involved in observing nearly every time and place Denver City Government convened to work on improving its ethical culture. In that time, the researchers (along with several research assistants) recorded comments from 350 city employees and elected officials, most of whom they met during the organizationally mandated ethics training. Government members included the entire gamut of job responsibilities and levels of hierarchy. In other words, unlike many pre-test/post-test studies of ethics training described above, these researchers observed, listened, and recorded what happens in the in-between.

Jovanovic and Wood’s (2006) research approach is unique in that it is a real-time, long-term observation of what really happens to an organizational culture when management requires ethics training throughout the system. The researchers recall:

We saw that, at times, people take ethics very seriously and they talk that way; at other times, they tease, joke, and act as though ethics is for sissies. Often, they are legalistic; sometimes, they speak from common sense. Often, the talk is theoretical, impersonal, detached; occasionally, the talk is very practical, immediate, back-and-forth, and highly personal. In our observation of ethics training, we found that almost all of the talk about ethics fell into the theoretical, abstract, and impersonal category.

Jovanovic and Wood (2006) observed in meeting after meeting that ethics trainers would engage in moral instruction without regard for the give and take of discussion. Trainees followed suit; when they spoke, they echoed stilted, unemotional descriptions of ethical mandates, without regard for the difficulty and emotionality that often ensues in real work-world experiences of ethics. The pair of researchers witnessed a chronic playing-out of “the moral superiority of the uninvolved”—a phrase coined by management scholar, Pastin, in 1985.

Moral superiority of the uninvolved is one of the chronic problems of delivering effective organizational training. Moral superiority of the uninvolved is the intellectual and moral pride one feels in evaluating others’ moral choices, especially when those choices have no consequences for one’s own experience. Jovanovic and Wood describe it as “how easy it is to be righteous when you are not involved yourself” (p. 392). The hypothetical scenarios that were the
substance of the Denver City Government ethics training produced a moral superiority of the uninvolved and, in doing so, reinforced a perspective of ethical behavior as primarily a matter of knowing better to do better—but more on that later. Much of the training—and probably much of all organizational ethics training everywhere—was discussed in subjunctive (e.g., “What should the character do in this situation?”) and confident ways (e.g., “I’d tell my supervisor the right way.”), despite being conjecture and speculation of it all. In effect, the training was a world unto itself. Organizational members pressed pause and left the boundaries of their usual workplace interactions and demands in order to enter into an alternate domain of hypothetical, ethical instruction and storytelling.

In addition to seeing a great deal of moral superiority of the uninvolved from trainers and trainees, Jovanovic and Wood (2006) observed a few instances that stood apart from this norm. There were times when current issues faced by participants in their actual work surfaced (and deviated from the pre-planned ethics training). When those questions arose, confidence and moral superiority shrunk and discomfort soared. Moral superiority of the uninvolved is appealing precisely because it is comforting in a way that dealing with actual ethical questions is not. In one fascinating moment of the moral struggle of the deeply involved, the researchers observed a dialogue among police officers during an advanced ethics training session at a police academy. In the ethics training, the participants were asked what was thought to be another “obvious” ethics question: “Should you accept a free or discounted meal at a restaurant where you want to eat?” I can only imagine the ethics trainers assumed a half-hearted, sleepy, tonal, “Nooo,” would come from the crowd of trainees, because that is what organizational ethics training is usually doing. This time was different. The question was a minefield. A commanding officer spoke up: “This is the only question that ever comes up [in the ranks]. It’s not, here’s an abortion clinic and what do I do? It’s hey, Captain, can I eat out tonight?” Another officer agreed and echoed, “This is the ethical issue for the police department. If we can’t solve this one, then it really opens up the whole ethics code to interpretation” (p. 395).

What had the officers in a tizzy? The question was personal, emotional, and complicated (even though it was not supposed be). Business owners and citizens want to show their appreciation to officers and find extending hospitality through the giving of food and snacks a good way to express that gratitude. Owners and the public like having officers present because of the security it provides. On the other hand, there is a concern that gifts of food are a way of influencing officers should they want to purchase a blind eye from the police. Yet, maintaining a positive rapport with the public is an important objective of patrol and other police outings, but needing to turn down offers of hospitality complicates achieving that objective. Reciprocity is key to relationship building. Turning down kind gestures does not seem like an optimal way to win friends and build a sense of trust and community between the police force and citizens. During
the discussion—which the trainers attempted to halt—it was explained that sometimes officers order food and intend to pay for their own meals. Yet, owners or other citizens could be quite forceful and sneaky in attempting to pay on the officer’s behalf, thereby creating a complex social scene in which the officer has to deny the show of hospitality, hospitably. As if officer’s jobs are not already complicated enough dealing with crime and criminals, the code requires they have the social skill of an international diplomat. How do you force a citizen to allow you to pay? Forcing to pay is awkward. It is complicated. It begs the question of what is really most ethically excellent (as opposed to what is the policy)? Why be rude? Especially since there are plenty of places officers do not feel welcome. Everyone likes to eat where they feel welcome, right?

As the officers’ genuine moral dialogue unfolded they decided eventually and collectively that:

it is impractical or offensive not to accept a meal and that there are other times when a meal should not be accepted under any circumstances . . . [they] determined it is a good practice for the officer to leave an amount of cash on the table equivalent to the price of the meal and the tip . . . [even though] this solution was not perfect (p. 396).

The dialogue was real; it did not suffer from the moral superiority of the uninvolved because they each felt the question truly mattered to their work and sense of well-being. The officers were mindfully engaged and they sought to discover a reasonable and ethical best practice. Importantly, their ethical insight was accomplished without reference to esoteric ethics philosophy. I can only imagine how much more this discussion would go on to influence the officers’ actual ethical behavior next time they are faced with this common dilemma of their work. In contrast, how rarely do lofty, unemotional ethics training scenarios change our actual ethical behavior at work?

The observation of Denver City ethics training continues to be revealing in that Jovanovic and Wood (2006) reported the official ethics trainer of the session apologized to them (as researchers) that the training of the police officers had been so “wishy-washy” (p. 396). In other words, from the ethics trainer’s perspective the training went wrong or was somehow less than ideal. The trainer’s plan had been derailed by a conversation that moved communication about philosophy there and then to an authentic moral dialogue about work in the here and now. The trainer believed the session was a failure. However, another reading is possible: Perhaps this unusual display of emotionally laden discussion about ethical issues that really matter to trainees’ work experiences is ideal. It would stand to reason that the officers present in the discussion would be much more likely to follow the general practice of leaving money than a set of ethics trainees who discussed the merits of Utilitarian ethics for several hours.
In other words, the contextual, emotional, complicated discussion of ethics-lived would likely translate more powerfully into particular workplace practices than the normative approach to ethics training we are all so accustomed to. Talking about real-world questions was building a kind of capacity among the officers. That talk built among them a capacity to seek answers to vexing ethical questions about their work, and it also built among them a capacity to have those ethically charged, work-related conversations without easy answers. Having difficult conversations (especially difficult ethical conversations) takes practice and the precedence they were creating would make the next conversation that much less difficult and more likely to occur. The latter half of the book describes the capacity-building nature of such conversations about actual workplace ethics.

Importantly, the officers’ discussion was different than most organizational ethics training in several ways. First, the discussion did not presume trainees were deficient in their moral knowledge. Instead, the discussion unfolded in such a way that presumed the participants had ethical sensitivities in sufficient measure to hold a thoughtful group consideration of the ethicality of their work practices. In other words, the officers treated each other as ethically intelligent and fully formed adults during the conversation. There was no need to teach or review philosophy. Second, the discussion was not about abstract and unemotional hypotheticals, but about an ambiguous and anxiety-inducing situation they all experienced. Third, the discussion represented a rare opportunity for officers to reflect on the ethicality of their work practices and update them according to the ethical tensions present in the context of their work. Fourth, the group’s conclusion implied that future ambiguities were still possible and so ongoing thoughtfulness was still required of officers’ application of the best practice they articulated. Recall that Jovanovic and Wood (2006) had to observe the ethics initiative for years to see the few instances like the one that unfolded among the officers. Perhaps not surprisingly, the officers brought an occupational culture of high-reliability with them to the training and they talked into the ethics training their culture (more on this point later in the book).

**A Different Kind of Ethics Training: Sensemaking and Metacognitive Strategies**

Researchers Michael Mumford and colleagues (2008) undertook another truly unique research project on ethics training. Unlike Jovanovich and Wood, Mumford and colleagues conducted the standard pre-test/post-test experiment. However, their ethics training was anything but usual. The researchers undertook a project whose chief goal was to train doctoral students working in the biological and social sciences to make better decisions about research ethics. As a part of their efforts, they conducted a careful review of the ethics training literature for
ideas on how to train the doctoral students; the researchers came to a similar conclusion to the one presented here:

Some studies have provided evidence indicating that training may lead to improvement in ethical decision making among scientists. . . . Other studies, however, suggest that ethics training does not have much effect on the ethical decision making of scientists. . . . With these conflicting findings in mind, our intent in the present study was to develop a new model curriculum for training . . . integrity (p. 316).

After reviewing the state of the literature on ethics training, the researchers concluded (as I have) that traditional ethics training has a pitiful record. In turn, Mumford and colleagues undertook to reimagine ethics training. The research team’s approach did not involve teaching theories of normative ethics to doctoral students. Instead, the researchers’ ethics training intervention involved explanations of what the researchers labeled “metacognitive reasoning strategies” (p. 322). The phrase described methods for checking in on one’s own thinking and methods for evaluating that thinking for common pitfalls.

Trainees enrolled in training that lasted several weeks and participated in a number of activities designed to sensitize them to the complexity and difficulty of making ethical decisions. For example, trainees watched a video about Stanley Milgram’s now infamous research study: In the study, now deemed unethical, Milgram asked participants to shock another participant (who was actually an actor) in another room with a painful electric shock for answering questions incorrectly. The actor playing the shock receiver would groan and even scream in pain when the “shock” was administered. Unbeknownst to participants, the study was centrally concerned with understanding how readily they would comply with an authority figure’s unethical request (Milgram’s request as the researcher) to hurt an innocent person. Many did comply, and they felt profoundly guilty for their compliance. Trainees in Mumford and colleague’s study watched videos like this one and discussed and forecasted how they might react in the midst of the actual study. The takeaway of experiences like this was that the potential for our need to comply with authority’s directives can cloud and bias ethical decision making. From another perspective, participants, who are themselves aspiring researchers, could be enticed to conduct such research because of its potential to further their careers. Milgram was not positioned in the context of the training as an evildoer different from trainees, but rather as a cautionary tale of what any human being, or scientist, is capable of when ethical judgment is clouded by the need to comply with an authority figure or when the possibility of personal benefit is at stake.

The doctoral students were taught how to think—and at times, distrust—their own ethical thinking. Rather than teaching trainees philosophies of normative ethics, the doctoral students engaged in activities that helped them gain in flexibility so that they could better look in on and reflect on the quality of their
ethical judgments about research. Trainees practiced analyzing their own personal motives, questioning their own judgment, recognizing the influence of contextual circumstances, dealing with their emotions to decide whether emotions were helping or hindering the ethicality of their research decisions, seeking advice and help from others’ less involved, anticipating a wealth of consequences for their decisions, and considering the effect of actions on others.

Ultimately, the study revealed major improvements in trainees’ ethical decision making, and those gains were sustained six months later when the researchers returned to study a segment of the trainees. In fact, the improvements documented from the usual ethics training were staggeringly large. In contrast to the inconsistent, unstable, and equivocal effects so common of ethics training done in the conventional manner, these researchers’ effects were large, sustained, and clear. Doing ethics training differently paid off.

The authors write:

Practically, many ethics training courses used in the sciences seek simply to provide knowledge of basic guidelines and ethics rules. However valuable and necessary it may be to provide such basic knowledge, it may prove of limited value when people are presented with complex, ambiguous, real-world ethical problems. General principles do not always provide people with effective guidance for working through the complexities of concrete ethical dilemmas, and even knowing what to do does not always translate into actually taking the right course of action. By providing practical strategies for working through ethical problems, however, ethical decision making becomes more likely (p. 328).

Indeed, these two studies hint at a new paradigm for thinking about and training the leading of organizational ethics. The studies could not be more different in terms of method. Interestingly, Jovanovich and Wood (2006) conducted a slow and deliberate observation of a real ethical culture change initiative; Mumford and colleagues (2008) conducted an experiment and reinvented the very notion of what content should be taught in the ethics training curriculum. The studies have in common the ideas that actual organizational decisions are mired in emotion, context, and complexity, and attempts at improving others’ ethical behavior in the workplace must take these dynamics seriously.

The following chapters explain a large shift that is currently underway in our understanding of ethical decision making. The implications of recent advances in moral psychology and neuroscience are revealing that it is inappropriate to continue viewing working adults as incomplete or inadequate moral thinkers who just need what traditional organizational ethics training provides. Those advances suggest organizational ethics are intuitive and profoundly communicative in nature. In light of those insights, the latter half of the book proposes an alternative approach to leading organizational ethics from an organizational communication perspective.